

The Cultural Sword: Leveraging Cultural Property in Iraq

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Iraq's Cultural Property Situation

Cultural property has always been an unfortunate victim in times of armed conflict. From the ancient Romans and Greeks through the most recent war in Iraq, cultural property has proved vulnerable to both plunder and destruction as a result of military action. By the end of the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971, two thousand Hindu temples had been destroyed; most of the damage was “caused by plunder rather than military action.”¹ Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan led to the 1993 sacking of the Kabul Museum, during which looters used the museum’s own library to guide them to the most valuable pieces.² Despite the vulnerability of cultural property throughout history, the United States has been conscious of it during times of war. From the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives teams that set out to protect and recover art during World War II to US refusal to attack cultural sites even as Saddam Hussein placed valuable military assets in and around them during the first Gulf War, the United States and its military have protected countless pieces of art and priceless artifacts.

Yet US forces were unable to protect Iraqi cultural property in their second Gulf operation. In April 2003, shortly after the US-Coalition led invasion of Iraq, looters—among them, museum insiders, professional looters, and opportunistic members of the public—convened at the museum and approximately 15,000 objects were lost.³ Media reports of the looting, however, reported that 170,000 were stolen, a gross exaggeration that caused hysteria on the part of the archaeological community. Cultural property faced further damage in the same month when American forces established Camp Alpha, headquarters of the Multinational Division Central-South in the heart of Babylon; the camp included helipads, living quarters for 2000 troops, parking areas, fuel depots, and multiple trench cuttings. It was June 2004 before the Coalition Provisional Authority created a statement regarding the protection of the ancient city.⁴ The use of sandbag filler in Camp Alpha was bulldozed from depths of up to two meters and contained quantities of potsherds, tablet fragments, and other artifacts.⁵

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Nearly six years after the looting, the museum remains closed to the public. Mass kidnappings near the museum in 2006 caused Donny George, the director at the time of the looting, to flee the country.⁶ Today, the museum is encased in concrete with an iron security door as about 300 staff work to restore the museum and its artifacts. Yet Amira Edan al-Dahab, the museum's current director, notes that she cannot risk opening the museum to anyone. Furthermore, the nation's nearly 12,000 historic and archaeological sites are subject to looting and artifacts continue to be leaked onto the black market.⁷

In October 2008, then-First Lady Laura Bush announced that a two-year, \$14 million grant would be awarded to the National Museum to refurbish its buildings, send Iraqi archaeologists to the US to train, and open a conservation center in Irbil.⁸ The impact of this grant remains to be seen, but it is clear that treatment of cultural property—whether positive or negative—can have a great impact on the international community's impression of US forces, the trust of the Iraqi people in the US, and the ability of cultural property to create a unified sense of national pride.

The Cultural Sword: Non-lethal targeting and cultural property

The US employs information operations in everything from publicizing US-built schools and wells to the distribution of leaflets on the capture of insurgents who posed a danger to the community in which they lived. These IO campaigns allow the US to disseminate its positive impacts—and the good works of Iraqi Army, government, and Police—to the population at large in an attempt to create a greater level of trust in the government and create a sense of unity and security amongst the population. Yet, the US has thus far neglected to leverage Iraq's cultural property in its information operations and non-lethal targeting.

In February 2003, the United States Army War College issued a study detailing post-conflict requirements in Iraq. Occupiers assume responsibility for historic and cultural sites, the study stated. The destruction or damage of these sites, "could fan discontent or inspire violence, not just in Iraq but around the region."⁹ At the same time, the protection of these sites can create an environment that would lead to increased security.

The National Museum is “typically...the first physical manifestation of a country’s independence, as a sign of that country’s claim to its place among the world’s...nations.”¹⁰ The Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad was created in 1923 by Gertrude Bell, who noted that “displays of ancient Mesopotamian achievements would bolster Iraqi confidence in the future of the new nation.”¹¹ The museum’s holdings consist almost entirely of pre-Islamic art, some as old as 6000 years. In a nation where religious and tribal differences create a divisive and violent climate, there is a common history. Iraq is perhaps the greatest repository of cultural heritage: one of the earliest works of literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, was written in ancient Mesopotamia and cuneiform tablets and scrolls display the earliest form of written language. The term Cradle of Civilization is not an unintentional reference.

Such a secular history juxtaposes against the Islamic radicalism and sectarianism at the root of violence in the country today. Yet the cultural property of Iraq—the very beginnings of civilization itself—holds the potential to create a sense of historical unity and greater sense of national pride. If Iraq is ever to come together as a single nation under a single government, both the Iraqi government and US military forces in the country need to highlight the importance of these cultural achievements. The main effort, however, needs to be primarily of the Iraqi government with only support from the US military in order to avoid a perceived effort of the US to sever ties between the Iraqi populace and Islam.

Implementing Cultural Property as a Non-lethal target

A focus on cultural property as a non-lethal target has the ability to attack political, economic, social, and information aspects of the counter-insurgency operations amongst the Iraqi population. Politically and socially, the common history that can be created using cultural property can lend greater legitimacy to the Iraqi government and a sense of unity amongst the population. Divisive tactics used by various insurgent groups would potentially meet deaf ears in a population attempting to regain a sense of its former glory as the Cradle of Civilization and government efforts to build infrastructure or create social programs would be given more credence by a population united by its common history.

Perhaps most importantly, cultural property can have a great impact on the economic situation of a country. Cultural tourism is a lucrative industry, with countries such as Italy, Egypt, France, and Greece benefiting from a constant flow of tourists flocking to see their historical achievements in monuments, ancient ruins, and museums.

Though the Iraqi museum will likely not be opened for a number of years, as it requires a staff of nearly 2000 and now has 300 in addition to the infrastructure damage, certain smaller items may be able to go on tour given proper security conditions. This could be a particularly beneficial aspect of US information operations as it would expose those throughout the country, not just in Baghdad, to the common secular history. A project of this nature might be the responsibility of a small, highly trained group of Iraqi archaeologists and a security element that included Iraqi Army and Police alongside US forces. The impacts of this type of operation would provide a sense of national unity and increase the population's pride and trust in their national army and police forces. The creation of confidence in both the government and the nation could contribute to a decrease in violence as the mass base supports the government and insurgents lose support.

Additionally, with 12000 historic and archaeological sites and only 2000 guards for such sites, artifacts outside of the museum's protection are in danger. Yet villages and towns could take responsibility for the sites in their area. US and Coalition forces, along with Iraqi Army and Police with the aid of Iraqi archaeologists could train villages how to protect the artifacts and archives in their region. Giving the towns a sense of responsibility for their heritage would further a sense of unity as well as create jobs.

Ultimately, the protection of cultural property will fall on the Iraqi government given the current political situation and drawdown of American troops in Iraq in the foreseeable future. Yet this is not to say that the US cannot leverage the common history and national glory provided by Iraq's cultural property in order to leave the region with a relatively more stable security environment. While cultural property is valuable in and of itself, as something that belongs to humanity and not merely Iraq, it can provide an important non-lethal target to create national unity and benefit US operations in the counterinsurgency fight.

¹ Neil Brodie, Jenny Doole, and peter Watson, *Stealing History: The Illicit Trade in Cultural Material* (Cambridge: The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2000), 21.

² Brodie, et al., 21.

³ Bogdanos, "The Casualties of War," 477.

⁴ Benjamin R. Foster, Karen Polinger Foster, and Patty Gerstenblith, *Iraq Beyond the Headlines: History, Archaeology, and War* from *Series on Iraq War and its Consequences*, Vol. 2, (London: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2005), 222.

⁵ Foster, et al., 222.

⁶ Larry Kaplow and Cathleen McGuigan, "Mess O'Potamian Art," *Newsweek*, February 11, 2008.

⁷ Kaplow and McGuigan.

⁸ Larry Kaplow, "Iraq National Museum gets New American Aid," *Newsweek.com*, October 20, 2008.

⁹ Mary Ellen O'Connell, "Occupation Failures and the Legality of Armed Conflict: The Case of Iraqi Cultural Property," Public Law and Legal Theory Working Paper Series, No. 23, Center for Law, Policy, and Social Science Working Paper Series No. 16 (August 2004): 22, in *Social Science Research Network* [database online]; accessed 30 April 2008.

¹⁰ Nada Shabout, "The Iraqi Museum of Modern Art: Legal Implications of the 2003 Invasion," *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (May 2006): 286.

¹¹ Foster, et al., 225